



# THE HILL TIMES

## Americans are very different indeed



BY ALLAN BONNER

MANCHESTER, N.H.—  
There's only one picture of  
Abraham Lincoln deliver-  
ing the Gettysburg address.

It's a blur because the speech was so short and photography was so cumbersome that the cameraman had just set up his awkward equipment by the time the president was finishing and sitting down.

Canada's first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, hung over at a speech, once threw up on the platform and made a joke about his opponent making him sick.

Many early political speeches featured crowds in the thousands who probably couldn't hear the speech at all. Certainly they couldn't get close enough to famed and perennial U.S. presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan to smell the combination of perspiration and rubbing alcohol he was famous for.

Even in early American primaries, before the invention of the lightweight sound camera, candidates walked the streets almost alone and unnoticed, looking for voters to speak with. Most voters didn't care.

Winston Churchill was right: democracy is the worst possible system of government, except for every other one you can imagine. It's a shame we can't have Churchill, the journalist, covering presidential candidates' debates. Readers will have to make do with my take.

Like the blurry picture of president Lincoln, I only got a distorted impression of what went on recently in New Hampshire. My first impression was that this was a "media event." That's a tired old term, but it's the best one that came to mind as I walked out of the media parking lot to see the huge CNN bus on the lawn of Saint Anselm College.

I registered at the CNN credential centre and was presented with a CNN reporter's notepad. Signs pointed to the CNN restroom, catering, and stand-up locations. Conventions, elections, and debates have always been opportunities for networks to showcase new technology, anchors, and reporting techniques such as the instant tracking polls

conducted in this debate. As the saying goes in politics, CNN won the sign war.

The next thing I noticed was the circus atmosphere in the "protest parking lot." AARP, the lobby group for older people showed their flags. An upside down school bus made a point about education funding and a vehicle turned into a pie chart illustrated how much of the federal budget went to the Pentagon. Protesters used costumes and theatre to vie for media attention with candidate supporters chanting and waving banners.

Not only has the intensity of the coverage changed over the years, but so has the nature and kind of coverage. The Associated Press was in New Hampshire, of course. But the reporter was also filing voice reports for AP radio—from his notebook computer. The Washington Post is here, but the most noticeable reporter is Chris Cillizza from the dot-com version of the paper, who's also a regular on cable talk shows. There's even a guy in the protest parking lot carrying around a notebook computer with a camera on it, covering the debate for a web page—a videoblogger.

It looks as if every kind of media are trying desperately to be another kind of media. The press filing centre is a hockey arena with 500 domestic and 100 foreign reporters in it. CNN has installed at least 30 big-screen TVs. The hundreds of six-foot tables have power cords for equipment. There's CNN catering at the back of the arena with a steady stream of snacks and food.

The only problem is, little can be heard of the actual debates. Like the audio version of the blurry picture of Lincoln, we're getting echoes and feedback that barely compete with 600 talkative reporters. I'm not getting the two excellent hours of pre-debate analysis from MSNBC or any other network, including CNN. The best coverage I got for either debate was after I was home for the night in Deerfield, and could watch the edited clips and commentary on CNN and the entire debate rerun on both CNN and CSPAN.

Even well-known reporters rode into this valley with the 600. They came for two main purposes: coverage of any presidential

campaign event is also a death-watch. Should a candidate have a heart attack or be assassinated, reporters will be there to cover it. Secondly, even big-time reporters want the byline of Manchester, New Hampshire on their stories. Imagine going to live analysis of the debate with a reporter who's sitting in her home in Virginia watching TV. It just doesn't have that prime-time feel to it.

On the trifling issue of the candidates themselves, America could do much worse than a contest between Mitt Romney and Hillary Clinton. John McCain has injured himself badly on immigration and even with his true and passionate talk about aboriginal language. Rudy Giuliani's tragic flaw is his big-city liberalism. Barack Obama is robotic in the large group format and is appearing less ready for prime time, and John Edwards is too far left.

Finally, there's always talk of the differences between Canada and the U.S. S.M. Lipset was preoccupied with this topic in several books, including *Agrarian Socialism*, which pondered why the United Farmers' Party disappeared in the U.S., while the NDP hung on in Canada.

Here's what I saw, soaking up a little local colour in a farm kitchen in Deerfield, mid-way between Manchester and Concord (pronounced Kaa-kerd). My 82-year-old stepmother, Joanne Wasson is serving drinks and helping along the political conversation. Her son, Warren, and his Canadian wife are offering their perspectives. On the window sill is a pile of ammunition. Up against the wall lean four long guns. Two are just BB guns to scare squirrels, but one's a 4-10 shotgun and the other a multi-shot .22. Over the kitchen sink is a derringer—Joanne calls it her "muff-gun" since it can be concealed in a woman's hand-warmer. She's not sure there's any ammunition for it, but she does have ammo for her .38 and her 9 mm. She worries a little about the 9 mm because her first husband thought it was a little dangerous for her because it's an automatic. The others are safe I guess. Americans are very different indeed.

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